

Quinceañera gives touch of 'sweet' to young Latinas who've struggled

Coming-of-age rite offered to a few after tough youth

By **FRAN MORALES**
Herald staff

WEST HARTFORD — For many Hispanic girls, a Quinceañera is a rite of passage into womanhood.

For 15 girls from the state Department of Children and Families, it's a dream come true.

The girls, five of whom are from the department's New

Britain office, lined up for rehearsal Wednesday at St. Joseph's College in West Hartford in preparation for Saturday, when they get their own group event. They were picked out of more than 130 who applied and wrote essays for the department's first-year Quinceañera program, which, among its many goals, is intended to raise cultural awareness for at-risk Hispanic youth.

The Quinceañera — or "sweet fifteen" — is a traditional weddinglike ceremony — fit for a princess and sometimes as expensive. Think debutante's coming-out party.

Hispanic families, poor and affluent, contribute to what has become a \$400 million industry. The department is reported to be spending \$40,000 for its event.

But it's not all about the party, says Maribel Vazquez, the department's program director, but about teaching the participants what it means to be a Latina.

"It doesn't matter what their past was. We want to provide them a positive outlook [and show them] that we care about them and we are here to recognize and empower them as Latinas," Vazquez said.

It is something 16-year-old Crystal Cruz, of Newington, always wanted.

As Cruz prepared for the dress rehearsal, it was pure excitement but a proud moment, she said.

Cruz came from a troubled and unstable family, but her foster family, the Revs. Bruce and Lisa Fletcher, marked the beginning of some good changes.

Cruz aspires to be an elementary schoolteacher and this summer participated in a program at Central Connecticut State University tutoring third-graders at Chamberlain and Lincoln elementary schools in New Britain.

"I see the Quinceañera as becoming a woman and being someone," Cruz said. "I want to succeed in life and represent my family in a different way."

Staff members weren't prepared for the overwhelm-

ing emotion in many of the girls' essays, including that of Cruz, conveying hardship and abuse or neglect. Others, such as 16-year-old Melissa Sanchez, told stories of strife in foster care and their search for identity.

Sanchez said she was abused by her biological mother and has been in the foster-care system since she was 5 years old. She said the instability made it hard to learn about her Puerto Rican culture, and she has struggled with her identity.

"Being part of this Quinceañera will help me take part in a culture I'm still learning about," Sanchez said.

The celebration is also intended to recognize the achievements, leadership and promising futures of young

Latinas in the department's care, Vazquez said.

The state agency reported that nearly half of department cases are teens; about 3,200 are in the system at any given time.

About 65 percent of the kids are minorities — 25 percent of them of Hispanic descent, Vazquez said.

The Quinceañera program is intended to emphasize and develop cultural awareness, improve the girls' self-confidence and self-esteem and encourage them to pursue higher education, Vazquez said.

"These girls have come a long way," she said. "This is their moment to shine and be recognized by people who do



Amy Reed/The Herald

New Britain girls Crystal Cruz, 16, Ashley Acevedo, 14, and Melissa Sanchez, 16, applied and wrote essays to be among 15 young Latinas taking part in a state Department of Children and Families-sponsored Quinceañera to be held Saturday.